

## *“Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men”*

*Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20*

December 24, 2022

I recently saw some YouTube videos put together by another pastor. He spoke in one of these videos about an encounter he had with a man named Fred and his six-year-old son Sam about what they were going to do on Christmas this year. The father explained that they would get up and open their presents on Christmas morning and then they'd go to church. The son replied, “Church?! On Christmas? We're going to go to church on Christmas?” Fred patiently explained, “Of course, that's what Christmas is all about. It's about Jesus' birth and God coming to us.” Sam said, “I know, I know, I know! But Christmas! Church wrecks everything!”

The church wrecks everything. I think my kids and probably a few others will know this feeling come tomorrow morning. There, in the midst of the holiday hoopla, will come a major disruption. Yes, yes Jesus coming does and tonight we come here to encounter not only the church that wrecks everything, but also the child who was born to wreck everything bad.

It may sound a bit odd in the face of our culture's approach to Christmas, but we dare not forget the scandal of both the manger and the cross and be lulled by the culture's attempts to sentimentalize Christmas. We all do it and to be honest, it even happens in the church. Notice some of the quaint and peaceful expressions that come up in our hymns compared to what was likely to be the case in actual real time and space. “The cattle are lowing, **the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.**” Really, no crying. He'd probably fail an Apgar test. And the cattle mooing through the night when you've just given birth in a barn probably wasn't as comforting as the hymn lyrics make it sound.

Or consider the opening of the beloved carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Lovely words from the author, but if we think about the tumultuous history of the Middle East, imaging Bethlehem as peaceful more expresses a longing than an historical reality. With Roman centurions likely all over the place for the census being taken, Bethlehem surely wasn't a quaint and quiet town that night in the history of the universe.

We try and make quiet the historical reality that Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, came to us this night long ago in a place far, far away as the old expression goes. We try to keep Jesus meek and mild throughout the seasons of our life because some of the things He says are jarring, to say the least. “Turn the other cheek?” Like, who in the history of the world wants to do that? Isn't revenge best served cold. Aren't we better off striking first and asking for forgiveness later on? But that's not what Jesus says.

Yes, the actual words of Jesus disrupt our attempts to sentimentalize this whole holiday. “Pick up your Cross and follow me” doesn't sound so appealing in a world in which Amazon can deliver nearly anything under the sun to you by tomorrow at 7:30 am. What Jesus sounds like is a big disruption.

My plans got disrupted the other day and I wasn't terribly thankful about it. After work, I just wanted to go home. Despite the fact that Johnnie had told me, I went down Mount Holly-Huntersville Road. There was a big problem with that! Thanks to a wreck, the bridge into Gaston County was closed and traffic was being rerouted back to I-485. Well, despite having lived in the area for over 15 years now, I got supremely lost. There were no detour signs up yet and I went the wrong way on a traffic circle, I think. Saw the better part of Gaston County before I figured things out, I think. Yes, that was an unpleasant disruption. The world is all about giving up/s major disruptions to our timelines.

But just think about how much disrupted the world was and the lives of the people around Jesus at the time. To begin with, what about Joseph? We greet him here in what has to be a difficult time. For starters, just from his perspective, his betrothed is expecting a child from another father. We get an insight into Joseph's humble and loving nature by the way he treats Mary. By all accounts, Joseph could've had her stoned for goodness sakes for the appearance of transgression. And that's not to say that that was the only disruption in his life. This whole census was bound to be a colossal bummer to Joseph and to his entire family. One thing is for certain. This census was far from being for the benefit of the citizens. Whenever governments want to count their people, it's always as a means of figuring out how much tax money they're owed. So, to have to travel with kith and kin to Bethlehem would've been a real downer. But here is Joseph, in a barn with his betrothed. Now we get the sense that there must be troubles within his family. After all, theoretically all of his family members would've been in Bethlehem as well to be registered. Was there no one kind enough to look upon this

poor couple and offer them their beds given the gravity of the situation? There might not have been if Mary was figured to be a less-than-ideal wife to Joseph.

Bad disruptions come in our lives as well. A dear friend of mine lost his sister after a brief fight with pancreatic cancer. This year, he faces his first Christmas without his older sister. Needless to say, it's the kind of interruption none of us want for but many of us experience. One aspect of the good news of the incarnation is that Jesus, Himself, understands our pain in the time of loss. Jesus, as he faced Lazarus, his good friend's death, Jesus wept. Cried at the loss of life that He Himself would soon rectify.

And that's the other good news that emerges from this Christmas story. Jesus really was great good news for all the people because he brought with Him God's redemption from sin and death. Jesus Christ came to earth in order to redeem us. To break us free from bondage to sin and to death. And for that reason, Jesus is the best disruption into our lives in the history of the world.

So, thankfully, there are good disruptions in life as well as the bad ones. Sometimes, something or someone comes along and all of the sudden the world feels right in a special new way. Maybe it comes as you meet the love of your life. Perhaps that good disruption comes by way of a baby or a new friend or a promotion at work. Good things come and soon, life has taken on a whole new cast.

I saw this happen this year on the Kairos walk. There, we met a man, I'll call him Eddie. Eddie was a long-timer at the prison. I never found out what Eddie did to land himself in Kershaw correctional institution but, whatever it was, it must have been pretty significant as Eddie mentioned being locked up for over 20 years so far. Eddie had a disturbed spirit when we first met him at the table. Quiet and constantly looking around the room, you got the sense Eddie was expecting trouble. Maybe that was just the result of him having been incarcerated for as many years as he has. But as the weekend went forward, as the cookies and tang and talks worked their magic, Eddie loosened up. Thank goodness he did as it was only at the end of the weekend that he confessed something to me. He told me he was considering a desperate act. The kind that gets you locked up at even worse places than level two Kershaw correctional. But thankfully, the Holy Spirit interrupted that path for him.

The Holy Spirit can interrupt anyone's life. Consider the shepherds in the fields that night. At first, they're just tending their flocks in the fields by night. Then, the next thing you know, they're traveling hither and yon to Bethlehem to see exactly the fulfillment of what the angel predicted. "Good news of great joy for all peoples" can definitely motivate you to do something.

But you get the sense this was the kind of disruption you wait your whole lives for! Afterwards, what does the Bible tell us about what these shepherds did? They went about glorifying and praising God the rest of their lives. And it only makes sense, Jesus disrupts things in a good way.

I'll never forget a member of my first Church. His name was Tim. The thing about Tim was he'd lived a rough n' tumble life for much of his adulthood. It was only when he hit his late thirties that he started to change. You see, he'd made his way one Sunday to the First Presbyterian Church of Mount Holly where he was greeted by a man looking for his replacement. You see, this man had taught the men's Bible study class for years but now he was looking to turn the ministry over to someone else. Tim fit the bill. Fit right in to the class as well. Soon, given enough time and training, Tim did start to lead that Bible school class. He was still doing it, 25 years later. Now, an older man, there was no better student of the Scripture in all the church. Which, as Paul might say, is okay but if you have not love, you don't really have much. Thankfully, Tim did receive a bounteous measure of the Spirit's love. He was known to have a real impact on the people he met through his local business. Tim met Jesus and he was a changed man. Jesus disrupted the bike-riding, wife-beating biker club member he was and made him into a Christian.

And it isn't just our lives that Jesus' entry into this world disrupts. Jesus' entry into the world disrupts the way we look at worship. Prior to His arrival, worship of God was codified into a sacrificial system that centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. This was, after all, where God dwelt. But with the coming of Christ, all time and space has been hallowed by God and thus is appropriate to worship Him in it. We don't need a specific time or space to bow down and worship Jesus because He is with us everywhere and anytime by the power of the Holy Spirit. And because He's taken flesh, we can know Jesus just like we know our best friends, our parents even.

We can be here, with our families and friends as we worship the Lord who came to disrupt so many things in a good way...Jesus came to disrupt our plans. He came to wreck our selfishness and narcissism, so that we might

be able to love God and others and to receive that love in return. He came to wreck our fear of death, so that we might be able to live more fully and freely in this life. He came to wreck the political systems which choose who is in and who is out, so that all of God's children would be included in the kingdom. He came to break down our tendency of tribalism pitting one group against another. He came to break down our economy of values to build a different one based on valuing the eternal rather than things that pass away. He came to break down our ideas of family to embrace a wider vision of God's family, which includes all people, not just the ones like us. Yes, He came to wreck every structure we try to build which puts us first at the expense of everyone else. As He would later tell His followers, He came not to be served but to serve. And He calls us to follow in His path. And when we think that Jesus is in our midst, things in our world change, brighten even., the darkness of the world, disrupted.

Paul Harvey told a story one time long ago about a monastery that was dying. It was down to just seven men. As a result, the place had become a bit of a ramshackle and the brothers, constantly worried about whether or not their order would survive, took to bickering with one another about what to do to save the place. Finally, someone suggested sending an emissary to a nearby spiritual leader. This particular priest lived on the edge of a city, ministering to the people in it. When the monk from the monastery got there, he noticed that things there didn't look quite up to snuff, either. The old priest shared that fewer and fewer people were seeking out his wisdom. The brother shared his experience and the two commiserated. On the way out the door, the older spiritual leader said, "well, just remember that Jesus is among you in all that you're doing." But what was meant rhetorically was taken literally and the brother came back, convinced that what the older priest meant was that Jesus HIMSELF was living among the brothers. Because of this, the thought that Jesus was literally among them, all the brothers began treating each other with tremendous love and respect. Over time, that love spilled out from between the brothers, into their physical space. The brothers began the long work of clearing and restoring their surroundings. After all, if Jesus was in their midst, shouldn't it be wonderful for Him? So too did the monk's dedication to one another go so far as to inspire others to come and learn from them. This led to the acquisition of more novices. The monastery was saved.

The idea of God becoming human in lowly circumstances is wondrous, for it means that God knows you and loves you even as you are, whether you spend tonight alone or trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family. The miracle of Emmanuel, "God with us," is that we see that though Mary and Joseph may have been forsaken by others, they were never forgotten by God. Because of the Incarnation, we know the truthfulness of the Scripture as it tells us that God is with us in a new and special way through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit of God the Father.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

